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Academy of Aphasia 2010

Commemorating the 3rd Epoch of Aphasia Research: 50 Years since the Founding of the Academy of Aphasia.

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The early beginnings of the Academy of Aphasia date from 1960 (Sarno, 1986). Norman Geschwind, one of the Academy's founding members, is credited by Benson and Ardila (1996) with the creation of "the 3rd epoch of aphasia research". Geschwind collaborated with colleagues Harold Goodglass and Edith Kaplan at the Boston Veterans Administration Hospital to found the "Boston School" of aphasia research in the early 1960s. His theory of disconnection syndromes (1965) and model of organization of language in the left hemisphere (1970) were considered groundbreaking. However, it is rarely acknowledged that these theories were a direct consequence of Geschwind's reading of 19th and early 20th century writings on aphasia. His reconsideration of the works of Carl Wernicke, Ludwig Lichtheim, Jules Dejerine, John Hughlings Jackson, Henry Head and Kurt Goldstein were historically revisionist. His model of how language was organized in the brain was a novel synthesis generated from a reconsideration of these historical localizationists and holistic sources.

This approach initiated a new age of investigation into neurolinguistics. Geschwind and Goodglass employed insights from their historical perspective to facilitate new theoretical and clinical research strategies. This critical reading of aphasia history led to a major re-conceptualization of aphasia assessment, classification and treatment. Although it has been almost 50 years since Geschwind published his paper on disconnection syndromes, his model of the functional architecture for language is still considered to be of major conceptual utility in current neuropsychology and figures in today's standard textbook presentations (e.g., Kolb and Wishaw 2003).

New research employing imaging and computational networks techniques has lead to confirmation of many of his hypotheses. It has been proposed that the left hemisphere language processing area be named "Geschwind's territory" by Catani and colleagues in 2007. There has also been recent neuroanatomical confirmation of Geschwind's model of the role of the arcuate fasciculus in conduction aphasia (Bernal and Ardila, 2009). This paper will consider the state of aphasia research at the founding of the Academy of Aphasia in the 1960s and reflect on how the grounding of Geschwind's work in a historical perspective led to innovations that still hold potency today.

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